

Christmas Eve Prayer



After Forty Years

A Christmas Story by Elizabeth E. Stow

SOMEHOW she looked out of place among the gay throng of Christmas travelers that crowded the dull waiting room. Whenever the station master's stentorian voice rang through the room she started tensely, only to settle back stiff and alert, as before.

She was small and slightly bent. Her decent black dress, though far from the latest cut, had a nativeness of its own. She had probably passed twoscore and ten, yet there was a youthfulness about her that had defied hard work and trouble and sorrow. I felt sure that she had experienced all three. At last she glanced shyly in my direction.

"It's tiresome waiting, is it not?" I ventured.

"Oh, no! It's all so new and strange to me, and then I've only an hour to wait." Her voice, like herself, had a pleasant alertness.

"Perhaps you're unaccustomed to traveling," I suggested tentatively.

"This morning is the second time since I was ten years old that I've been on a train of cars," she answered, with suggestive accuracy. "I didn't need to mind staying at home, but the longing to go somewhere has seemed to grow on me. Why, one time I even thought of setting in the mill train that makes up at our station. It backs up and switches round for 'bout an hour so I could imagine I'd started for no body knows where. I even got so far as hoping a cinder'd blow in my eye like when I was a little girl and went to the city with father. It's a mercy I never told my idea. Folks would have thought I was getting in my dotage. I ain't tiring you, be I?" she asked anxiously. "I don't know when I've talked so much about myself."

I hastened to reassure her, remarking that home cares had doubtless prevented her getting away.

"How did you know?" she said, with a birdlike turn of the head. "Why, I was only eleven when I began making bread and pies. I was the only child you see, and mother began to be lame then. She kept right on growing worse and worse till finally her joints all stiffened up, just like the bones be tween. She suffered dreadful till the last fifteen years or so, when the soreness kind of left."

"How long did you say it was since you rode on the cars?" I asked.

"Just forty years ago this morning. It was on my eighteenth birthday. I was born the day before Christmas. I'm fifty-eight today."

"I wouldn't have thought it."

"That's what folks all tell me. I should think I'd look as old as Methuselah, though somehow I don't feel it. I remember that day, forty years ago, just as well. 'Twas just such a morning as this, the snow all a-spark and crisp underfoot. Goodloe said 'twas like fairyland. It was Goodloe Morton—a faint flush came on his faded cheek—who took me on the Christmas excursion to Buffalo. We was going to the falls, but something

prevented. It was the next spring he asked me to marry him. Dear me! You wouldn't think to hear me running on that you're the first person I've ever told it to. I wouldn't let Goodloe tell it neither. I was that afraid mother might hear. She was growing worse fast, and it would have worried her to think I couldn't leave home and marry like other girls. Goodloe felt quite worked up for a spell, but finally he married Sally Skinner. She's raised him a big family and been a good wife."

I fancied a wish escaped her, but after a moment she went on in her cheery way: "Well, as I was saying, the last time I rode on the cars was on my eighteenth birthday. By pushing a chair in front of her, mother could walk a little yet, but I got Susan Ann Ruggles to look in on her once in awhile, for father couldn't be depended on if he got after a new patent idea. You see, he was always going after patents. Were they a success? Oh, my, no! He spent pretty much all mother had. Her folks was pretty well off, you know. The only one of his ideas that was ever any good was a machine for lifting mother. I don't know what we'd have ever done without it. It turned with a crank, like a windlass, so I could lift her alone, just as easy."



"IT'S TIRESOME WAITING, IS IT NOT?" I said. "For all she was such a dear old woman, our doctor said we ought to have it patented, but I made him promise he'd never slip it to father."

"One time the doctor had a young doctor up from a New York hospital to see mother, and he thought the machine was great. 'Why,' he says, turning to me, 'you'll let me get out a patent on it, won't you?' 'Oh, yes,' says I, 'get out all the patents you want to and welcome.' So he had a photograph took of it. Afterward I felt real kind of sorry I let him do it, he was so young and green looking."

"Well, you can see, what with mother helpless and father patenting, there wasn't much chance for me to get away, but I always had a hankering

to see Niagara falls. It's a sight once seen stays by, they say. When our money was more plenty I laid out to go a number of times, but something or other always turned up to prevent. The first time father was took with a crick in his back. The next time the daughter of the woman who was coming to take care of mother had her leg broke in a runaway. Once everything seemed moving favorably. Charles Stringham had come to take care of mother. I had my ticket there and back, and even my lunch was put up for I was to start at 5 in the morning. That night there came up the worst thunderstorm you ever see and washed out the track on our branch, so the trains couldn't run for two days."

"Yes, mother died a little more than a year ago, just a year and three months after father. I was so thankful she went before me. You see, she had been sick so long, and then she was naturally pretty high spirited (she said I'd just let folks run right over me), so she used to speak out pretty sharp, and sometimes 'twas awful hard to please her, but I never minded, for I knew she meant all right. Oh, you don't know how lost I was after she was gone. Why, there hasn't been a night since I don't wake up 'bout the hour she used to ask me to pull her a little to one side or lower the cushion under her knees or do something to make her easier. Sometimes I find myself setting right up in bed, thinking certain she's calling me."

She was unable to go on for a moment, and though I'm called easy in conversation I could think of no comforting word.

"And I'm so thankful," she continued, regaining her self control, "the money held out till she was gone. I've had to let the place go. Last week after everything was settled up I had just \$25 left. Through it all everybody's been just as good to me as they could be. I often wonder why, for I've never had time to do anything for them. Well, I had plans all laid to go to work for Mrs. Jennings at a dollar a week when one evening—it was just a week ago—I was setting alone feeling pretty blue and thinking 'twasn't likely now I'd ever see the falls, and in stepped Dr. Brown. 'Well,' he says in his offhand way, 'Miss Fannie, can you bear good news?'"

"'Why, I don't know, doctor,' says I. 'I've never had much experience at it.' You see I was feeling blue yet."

"'Well,' he says, with a twinkle in his eye, 'I guess you're going to have a chance now. I've just heard from the young doctor who wanted to get a patent on your mother's lifting apparatus.'"

"He gave me a letter which had a check in it and which said I'm to have \$10 a week my lifetime. It's half the royalty he gets for his patent on mother's machine. Well, when I realized it wasn't a story out of a book I never waited to have a dress made nor nothing, for fear something'd happen. And so here I am on my way to Niagara falls. The falls are pretty badly froze up, of course, but I ain't going to take any chances on not seeing 'em. Besides—"

"Train going west!" came in stentorian tones.

A warm hand clasp, and the last I saw of my little friend was a cheery, expectant face lost in the hurrying crowd of Christmas travelers.

Christmas On Crusoe's Isle

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ROBINSON CRUSOE

ONE Christmas morning not many years ago I found myself up a tree in Crusoe's island. I was hunting meat for my Christmas dinner shortly after that morning, and as the most abundant supply was promised by the peccaries, or wild

dogs, that ranged the island, I had left camp and started out after them. It was great fun for awhile, for I fell in with a herd of about a dozen and had secured two of the "varnunts" when the survivors, seeming to think that "turn about is fair play," began hunting me. Then the situation assumed a different aspect entirely, for the peccary when aroused is one of the most bloodthirsty of creatures and as revengeful as an Indian. Fortunately for me, a great gum tree stood conveniently near, and by means of the lanas that swung from its branches I was soon safe from harm and looking calmly down upon the little black beasts as they raged around the trunk. But a peccary, as is well known, can entertain only one idea at a time, and the idea that possessed the shallow brains of my friends below was how to effect my destruction. After rooting around awhile they all sat down in an attitude of expectation and patiently waited for me to descend. And they would sit there, I felt sure, knowing peccary nature as I did, until they starved me to death rather than allow me to escape.

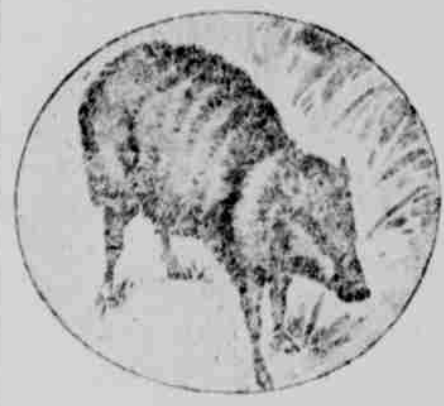
I had only a few rounds of ammunition suited to their needs, but I killed three more before I was exhausted and peppered the hides of several others so that if they ever had entertained the idea of leaving they abandoned it entirely. I had not a morsel of food about me. The limbs I sat astride of were not so soft as they might have been if they had been made to order, and I was getting uncomfortable when I noticed a commotion in the herd. The leader of the band, a grisly old tuskier with recurved fangs like Turkish scimitars, suddenly stood up and sniffed the air; then he uttered a "whoof" of rage and despair, struck a 210 gait and disappeared in the jungle, followed by all the survivors. I was saved by a black man and a dog.

It may or may not be true that the peccary has as intense a dislike for the black man as he has for a dog, but anyway the combination proved effective in this instance. The man who appeared at this juncture was the

while me done cut up an' skin dese haws—one, two, three, fo', fibe. Golly, massa, we done gut 'nuff meat fo' de Christmas dinnah, ain' we? Not to menshunn dis yere bag wiv two dozen fine fat crapauds in 'im, sah."

Pappy Ned set to work dressing (or to be exact, undressing) the peccaries, being careful not to taint the flesh with the contents of the peculiar musk gland which the species carries on its back, and while he is thus engaged seems a good opportunity for me to make my explanation as to the exact location of Crusoe's island.

It is not, as ninety-nine persons in a hundred think, the island of Juan Fernandez, on the southwest coast of South America, but it is a good many miles nearer the coast of our own United States, in the southeastern part of the Caribbean sea. I will not waste any time, either the reader's or my own, in argument, but respectfully refer the earnest inquirer to old Crusoe himself, Robinson Crusoe, Esq., mariner, of Bristol, England, whose adventures were first written out and published by Daniel Defoe in 1719, was somewhere in latitude 11 degrees north of the equator when he was wrecked—that is, of course, assuming there ever

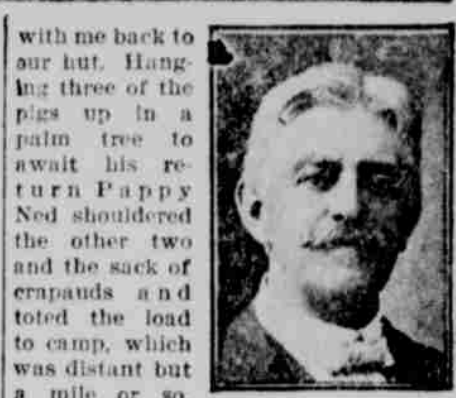


A PECCARY

was an entity called "Crusoe" in the flesh. But, whether he ever existed or not, that is where De Foe placed his hero when he had him wrecked on the coast of his island. To quote the words of Crusoe himself, just before it happened, "The master made an observation as well as he could and found that he was in about 11 degrees of north latitude, so that we were gotten beyond the coast of Guiana and beyond the river Amazonas, toward the Orinoco, commonly called the Great river."

Now, that would be evidence sufficient for any sailor, but let Crusoe further explain, as he does well along in his narrative, when he first circumnavigates his island kingdom: "The land which I perceived to the west and southwest was the great island of Trinidad, on the north point of the mouth of the river Orinoco."

Trinidad, as everybody knows, is on the north coast of South America and



FREDERICK A. OBER

with me back to our hut. Hanging three of the pigs up in a palm tree to await his return Pappy Ned shouldered the other two and the sack of crapauds and toted the load to camp, which was distant but a mile or so, and I followed.

After with my

gun. As Tobago is a tropical island the

meat would not keep a great while, and

we really had much more than we could

eat, but Pappy Ned said he knew of

some black people over on the other

side of the forest who would devour

what there was left provided he could

get word to them in time.

There never was a more beautiful

situation for a hut than the site of

mine on a hilltop above the forest line,

with views of tropical woods and shing-

ling shore, and, as the weather that

Christmas day was simply perfect, I

ordered my man to make our "spread"

in the open, beneath the cocoa palms,

sheltered from the blazing sun by the

golden rooftrees only. So he set the

table out of doors and lost no time in

getting at the cooking, which was done

over an open fire. Pappy Ned was as

adept at preparing exquisite dishes

from next to nothing as any Parisian

chef that ever lived. We had a garden

filled with such plants as the manioc,

tania, sweet potato, arrowroot, yam,

etc., not to mention corn and mountain

rice. From a wild grove of coffee trees

I obtained the fragrant berry for my

morning beverage; also cacao, or choco-

late, from another copse on the border

of the forest, while the cocoa palms

above and around my hut held a deli-

cious cool drink in their uricpe nuts.

Pappy Ned dried and grated the cassa-

va tubers, making "fatine," from which

he cooked great cakes more than a foot

across. The juice of the cassava is

poisonous in its crude state, but it is

converted into a palatable substance by

heat and forms the basis of the noted

"cassareep," or pepper pot. We always

had a pepper pot on hand as a stand-

by, into which we threw the odd pieces

of meat left over after ordinary rep-

asts, and a goodly amount of the pec-

cary flesh was thus disposed of, the

cassareep acting as a preservative as

well as a condiment. But pepper pot

was a poor man's makeshift. Pappy

Ned always declared, and the day be-

fore he had walked the beach for sea

turtle eggs, several score of which he

had brought back to camp, together

with a fine fish he had caught on the

shore.

After working three or four hours



THE SURVIVORS BEGAN HUNTING ME.

only other in that forest save myself, my sable servant, Pappy Ned. He had been out all night hunting crapauds, or forest frogs, and was on his way back to our camp with a backpack of batrachians, the legs of which were to be served up in a style which only Pappy Ned knew to perfection.

"Gorramighty, massa!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Was dat yo' gun goin' off pam! lak yo' shootin' a reg'ment ob sogers? Ki, but it's lucky ole Pappy Ned come 'long, hey? Dem haws done know Pappy Ned an' jes' e'lar out when dey hear um a-comin' along wiv dis yer dawg. Dey don' lak niggers, an' dey don' lak dawgs nuther, but dey's death on de bucker man."

"Well, pappy, the bucker man, as you call me, has brought death to the peccaries this time, and they've good reason for not liking me, I fancy. But you came along just in the nick of time, old friend, and I owe you another reward for saving my life a second time." He had nursed me through a fever a few months before.

"Oh, me massa, dat ain' nuffin'. Me only too glad to sarve me good massa, fo' shuah. Yo' jes set down an' rest."

is one of the finest British possessions in the West Indies. The only other is land which fully answers the description given by Crusoe in relation of location to Trinidad is that of Tobago, from which Sir Walter Raleigh probably derived the name of the "weed" we call tobacco.

I long held the theory that this was Crusoe's island, and in order to prove it went down there on a hunting and exploring expedition, afterward writing a book about my adventures which gives all the evidence, even if it does not sufficiently establish the facts. At any rate, I "played Crusoe" for months in Tobago, the island of the ancient mariner's adventures, built a hut of palm leaves in the forest and for a time lived as good old Robinson lived with the exception that I did not have any goats; neither did I tempt an attack of rheumatism by residing in a cave. I even had my poll parrot, my hammock under the palms and my "Man Friday," only the latter was a Carib, like Crusoe's factotum, but Pappy Ned, my honest and faithful old Pappy Ned, who soon finished skinning those peccaries and was ready to go

over the open fire Pappy Ned came to announce, "Dinnah done ready, sah," at the same time handing me a "canshow cocktail" made from the juice of an aromatic fruit brewed with rum and stirred to effervescence with a "swizzle stick."

The grand repast of the day opened with gumbo soup, followed by fish, frogs' legs and turtles' eggs, while in the center of the table was peccary roast, flanked by a nicely browned guinea bird and a native wild turkey, with a vast assortment of vegetables from my garden. There were no drinks artificially cooled, ice being an unobtainable luxury in Crusoe's island, but there were tropical fruits in abundance—pines, guavas, mangoes, oranges and custard apples—all of which had been plucked within a stone's throw of my hut.

One thing only was lacking—a goodly company—to enjoy that Christmas feast in Crusoe's island. But we were content, for, as Pappy Ned observed, "De good Gorramighty done gib us all we want, mo' dan we need and a heap sight no' dan we desare."

FREDERICK A. OBER.